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ABSTRACT

The library should not be separated from the greater society. Following the internal, philosophic upheavals of the 1950's and 60's, the membership of the American Library Association (ALA) is now attentive to the changing needs of the society. Libraries should gain more public recognition to improve their position in budget allocations and planning. This concluding address of the 1976 ALA Annual Conference summarizes current problems facing American libraries and suggests strategies for future growth. (EMH)

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The First Step into ALA's Second Century

Clara Stanton Jones

This has been a week of outstanding conference programming. Beginning in her year as vice-president/president elect, Allie Beth Martin was at the helm to plan the Centennial Conference and to execute much of the detail. The Chicago Conference Planning Committee, the Headquarters staff, committees and individuals from all over the nation have outdone themselves in imaginative and effective implementation. There have been rich choices to satisfy every interest and taste.

This has also been a week of inspiration and celebration. I feel justifiable pride in American librarianship as I take the gavel to become president of the oldest and largest library association in the world. This first step into ALA's second century, which all of us take together, is an auspicious moment in the history of our profession and of our Association -- indeed, of our nation.

Some thirty years ago at the first University of Chicago Graduate Library School conference, participants were reminded that (quote) "the library is part of society as a whole and does not exist in any sense in a vacuum, nor does it pursue its own course isolated from the happenings around it." This statement is a cardinal principle of all library service. Efforts to apply the concept have sometimes gotten librarians into difficulties, and without a doubt will continue to do so. Our wrestling with it has at times brought dissension into our Association, causing confusion and division. Fear of the portent of such a rationale can be intimidating. On the other hand, the temptation might arise at times to lock up the library and plunge into "causes." The practice of library science would be far easier if we could find an acceptable way to ignore or subvert the potent charge of this philosophy rather than rise to its challenge. However, confidence in the importance of our work of addressing

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My reading of the mood of the ALA membership gives indication of a genuine yearning to "center down" to the realities of our professional obligations -- to stretch out further into the unused portions of our capabilities. Some years back, as the upheaval and travail of the 1950s and '60s penetrated our midst, librarians cared enough about their role in the fabric of American life to respond with revolution -- an ALA revolution! Remember what our annual conferences were like in those days, the fierce battles that took place? Charges, challenges, denouncements, disputes were hurled back and forth like firebombs. Our passions were eventually channeled into the making of a workable organ that would usher in basic, needed change. The result was and is imperfect, but rebirth and renewal did take place in our Association. We are still involved in the transfer from the immediate past era to the very different present. We are still implementing changes brought about by our years of rebellion and intense self-examination. With the "revolution" behind us for the present, there is characteristic willingness on the part of the membership to accept and carry out responsibilities that entail a great deal of work. There is also a healthy awareness, sometimes sharply articulated, that too great a concentration on mechanics would encourage a return to complacency. "Business-as-usual" would bury all victories. As in the winning of freedom, there is little respite from struggle.

The American people are deeply troubled and frustrated in their efforts to live in a society in which there is so much chaos that hope is sometimes feeble.

A great underlying concern in my mind is what I view as a national lack of will to confront our real problems. Our generation is not the first to follow this course; indeed, this attitude is more nearly the historic norm than otherwise. However, the postponement of unresolved issues has snowballed into overwhelming proportions by now. This reluctance is a deadly factor, negating our chances for survival.

I believe I am correct in attaching to the mood of "centering down" a readiness within our Association to confront our knotty problems. One central issue, the lowering of dues to encourage broader participation in the Association, has already proved to have profound philosophical overtones -- and problems. There is no disposition to let the matter slide. We will go back to the conference tables to hammer out the truth of the matter. We can no more take for granted that there will always be an American Library Association than libraries of the nation can now take their traditional security for granted. ALA will continue to be challenged to increasing vitality, to responsiveness to member needs and interests, to strong and imaginative leadership. Young, new librarians, and others not in the orbit of the Association, will never cease to hurl the question, "What can ALA do for me? Why should I join?" There is a record of solid achievement to point to, but the only satisfactory answer is a continuing demonstration of utility. ALA has been a part of change, and more often than not has been a catalyst, an innovator to the profession. This is the role it can do well and this is what the membership desires and demands. ALA has withstood supreme testing during the past decade. By its responsiveness to contemporary needs in one of history's most difficult periods, it has earned the right to respect and support.

In 1876 Melvil Dewey spread the word about the fledgling American Library Association. At that early stage the only factor to buoy his hope was his vision of the potential of Library Science as a modern, organized profession. At the 50th anniversary of the Association he told the audience celebrating the Golden Jubilee that a librarian's function is (quote) "to give the public in the quickest and cheapest way information, inspiration, and recreation." I can only guess that the audience felt some dismay when he boldly added, "If a better way than the book can be found, we should use it." This must have seemed revolutionary and a bit impossible to the Roaring Twenties librarians. In reality, he was anticipating the growth of the profession in many directions: the advent of technology and the application of business methods to increase speed and efficiency of service. In addition, his declaration recognized that the scope of libraries would broaden, as it has done, now including the flexibility of bookmobiles, audio-visual materials, and more recently, information and referral service, and regional and national networking. Today our dedication and performance must match Melvil Dewey's expectations.

The wonderful Centennial Conference draws to a close. We have only a few hours remaining to spend together under one roof before actually taking the first step over into ALA's second century. Our vision has been enlarged by our coming together, our confidence and hope renewed. ALA is at the height of vigor in strong staff leadership and creative membership involvement. There is every reason to expect that librarians in everyday practice and in Association activities will think and understand their way into the new chapter ahead, rather than drift

and trail. You will recall that in the Old Testament the prophets often pleaded for a "sign" of reassurance or warning. The signs were revealed only if their spiritual awareness were highly enough developed to guide their search in the right places, to enable them to recognize what they saw, and to give them the courage to carry out their duty. "Signs" are not set apart from the troubled areas of life. If we turn our backs on reality, we will miss all the signs that would guide us to fulfillment. If we as librarians go where the signs are, identify them and find the courage to confront reality, then our efforts will align our profession with others traveling on a life-giving course. Librarianship is only one component of civilization, but we must recognize that at this crucial period in the human struggle, no profession or unit of society is dealing with just its own isolated practice or commodity. Librarians must appreciate the true weight of their contribution in the delicate and desperate balance in today's world.

As we go forward now, it is extremely important to gain more conscious public recognition of the magnitude of libraries and library work. This is necessary in order to achieve our goals in state and national legislation, to improve the position of libraries in budget allocations, and in planning for national library and information service. Without libraries, civilization as we know it would perish. This is a bold claim, but the evidence is there. If the power of these words is to be usefully applied, librarians must fully recognize their own worth relative to this truth. I am reminded of a recent issue of "American Libraries" which carried the title,"Who We Are." An impressive sampling of librarians was featured demonstrating an attractive

variety of specialties within our profession. The sense of those very words in that title have had great meaning for me all my life, harking back to the day I left home to go away to college. In making the rounds to bid my family goodbye, I stopped last to see my grandparents. My grandfather, the gentle family patriarch, born a slave, was somewhat pensive as he drew me down to sit on his knee. He didn't caution me to study hard, nor did he preach about boy-girl relationships; he only said, "Wherever you are, I want you always to remember who you are." As life unfolds to us, this universal charge becomes a never-ending quest of discovery. The discoveries of ALA's first one hundred years swell all our hearts with pride.

Clara Stanton Jones
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July 6, 1976